



Are You Willing to be a Leader?

Everywhere we look today it seems we are constantly seeking people to be leaders. We want the strongest, most qualified persons to lead our businesses, our communities, our governments and our nation. We all seem to realize that we need leadership more today than ever before to deal effectively with such critical issues as the economy, environmental pollution, the homeless, AIDS, drug abuse, health reform, cultural diversity and the complexity of the information age.

Yet in the face of these problems and the need for more leaders, there seems to be less effective leadership in our nation today than ever before. Perhaps even more alarming is the fact that much of society today apparently does not want to lead. They prefer to sit on the sidelines and not get involved -- not take risks. They are comfortable being followers.

Creating Leaders Throughout the Organization

Changing management philosophies, new technology, and the increasingly critical challenges faced by organizations today require that autonomy and decision making be pushed down the organization through the lowest levels -- so that leadership becomes the responsibility of people throughout the organization. Today's organizations strong leaders -- and lots of them. To meet the demands placed upon these organizations, leadership should be fostered at all levels. All employees, no matter what their title, should be encouraged to act as leaders.

What is Leadership?

If you are interested in becoming a leader, you must first understand the meaning of leadership. Leadership has been defined in hundreds of ways, with each new leadership book claiming its definition to be the best. Leadership is much like obscenity -- it is difficult to define, but we all know it when we see it.

Perhaps that is why Warren Benis and Burt Nanus, in their excellent book, *Leaders: The Strategies For Taking Charge*, reported on what leaders do, rather than what leadership is. They concluded that the 90 leaders they studied resembled each other in the following ways:

"They all have the ability to translate intention into reality and to sustain it. They all make a sharp distinction between leadership and management by concerning themselves with the organization's basic purposes, why it exists, its general direction and value system. They are all able to induce clarity regarding their organization's vision."

Distinguishing Between Leadership and Management

In concluding that effective leaders "distinguish between leadership and management," Benis explained: "*Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right thing.*" While management focuses on efficiency -- how to best accomplish a certain task, leadership focuses on

effectiveness -- what tasks should be accomplished. The distinction is vital, for there is no right way to do a wrong thing.

Thus, if you want to a leader, you must continuously challenge yourself, your fellow employees and management as to whether the "right thing" is being done, by asking:

"Are we showing the right way, the right direction, the right vision?"

"Are we doing the right thing in relation to furthering our mission, our purpose, our reason for existence, the service we provide?"

"Are we doing the right thing in relation to the values, the guides for appropriate and inappropriate behavior?"

Leaders Translate Intention Into Reality

Many of you may recall failing to accomplish a task as youngsters and being admonished with the saying: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." Leaders possess more than good intentions. According to Benis and Namus, they have the ability to translate intention into reality and to sustain it with action and behavior.

This ability comes from commitment -- a characteristic common to all individuals recognized as leaders. Commitment consists of a set of positive beliefs coupled with an equally appropriate set of positive action and behavior. Without the action and behavior, there is no commitment -- merely good intentions. Leaders not only say they want to do the "right thing" in relation to vision, mission and values, but they follow through with appropriate actions -- they "walk the way they talk."

Leadership is the act of leading by example, standing up for what you think is the right thing, showing the way, holding to the purpose and espousing the positive beliefs.

What is Doing the Right Thing?

What is meant by doing the right thing? What is this set of positive beliefs? Steven Covey explains these concepts in his best selling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Referring to the "character ethic," Covey contends that there are basic principles of effective living; and people can experience true success and enduring happiness only as they learn and integrate these principles into their characters. According to the character ethic, effective leaders have identified essential principles that they use in carrying out their responsibilities in both their personal and organizational lives.

Principles by Which Today's Leaders Operate

A number of leaders attending training programs nationwide were asked recently to identify the essential principles they use in their daily lives and the sources of these principles -- how and where they learned the right things to do. The principles most often identified by these leaders focused on integrity, fairness and the Golden Rule. Of particular interest were the stories, folklore and sayings that these officials recalled from their childhoods that had the most impact and helped instill in them the principles by which they now live.

While the story of George Washington and the cherry tree was reported by several as having an impact, many officials recalled simple, common sayings or proverbs told to them by their parents or teachers, such as: "*Honesty is the best policy*," "*Your word is your bond*," "***Don't criticize anyone until you have walked a mile in their moccasins***," "*Don't judge a book by its cover*," and "*A man of words and not of deeds is like a garden full of weeds*."

One leader remembered a police officer telling him, "*What you do at night will soon come to light*." Another related: "My daddy was a pig farmer, who always said, *the only thing wrong with pigs is, they take everything out of the feeding trough and never put anything back*.""

Numerous leaders reported that childhood books had an impact in forming their principles, particularly ***The Little Engine That Could***. One told the following story:

"Often when I was a child, I would become discouraged with difficult school lessons, mediocre athletic abilities, or perhaps problems with interpersonal relationships. My mom's favorite story, which always uplifted me, involved the engine that thought it could not pull the train up the steep hill but kept saying, 'I think I can' until it finally reached the crest of the hill and started down the other side. Then it said, 'I knew I could.' I have never forgotten that story."

Most officials interviewed shared childhood experiences involving friends, mentors, or institutions such as the church, school, or family that had an impact on their lives. The following are examples of these experiences:

"Once a 10th grade history teacher returned a homework assignment I had rushed through with the comment, 'you didn't sweat much for this report...just enough to get by.' I made sure my Mom and Dad never saw that paper. From then on, I strived ***to ensure that anything I did I could show to my parents with pride***."

"There wasn't any particular saying or story that had an effect. It was more the strong sense of family that was promoted and practiced by my parents, along with the notion that you as an individual can make a difference. My parents put a great deal of trust in us, they gave us flexibility and freedom to make our own decisions. They encouraged and praised us. They were fair and consistent, they loved us."

"I grew up in a poor, alcoholic family, but I remember my mother always instilling honesty and respect. She always gave of herself to everyone regardless of what had been done to her, saying, 'Treat others as you would like to be treated.' My father overcame drinking and began to help others with similar problems. From him I've learned to go forward and not to stop and feel sorry for myself. ***Only I can help myself***."

"When I was four years old I was in a grocery store with my father, and I put a walnut in my pocket. On the way home, I took the walnut out; and my father then taught me about honesty. He returned me to the store and made me tell the manager what I had done."

"Upon graduation from high school, my father asked what time I would be coming home. I responded that I would be home by 1:30 a.m., which was approved by the master. My celebration concluded when I entered the front door at 2 a.m., where I was met in the dark by a heavy blow to the chest, which knocked me to the floor and caused a severe loss of breathing ability. Upon the return of oxygen to the brain, I heard the loving, low voice of the master say: 'That is not for coming in late; that is for your inability to keep your word. An African-American has only ***two things on which he must survive -- his word and his credit***. You must learn to always keep both.'"

Relearning Fundamental Truths

In learning what these leaders consider to be principles for effective living, it is apparent that much of what is viewed as innovative today in leadership is merely the relearning of old, nearly forgotten, fundamental truths. The right thing -- the set of positive beliefs practiced by today's leaders is essentially the same set of beliefs practiced by leaders of generations and even centuries ago.

Indeed, the set of positive beliefs identified by the court community leaders surveyed has changed little from that espoused by our forefathers: George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln; as well as other great historical figures, such as Robert E. Lee and Winston Churchill.

These principles, which were also practiced by Buddha, Confucius, Solomon, Plato, Aristotle, Socrates and Jesus, are the same ones we continue to seek in our leaders today. These fundamental truths that need no justification -- *integrity, truth, fairness, dignity, respect, service, humility, love -- these are essential guidelines for human conduct* today just as they were centuries ago.

So You Still Want to be a Leader!

Those of you who still want to be leaders can now see that there is simply no easy way. People are not just born leaders; although, to be sure, some of us have more God-given talents than others. People do not become leaders just by being at the right place at the right time, although some of us learn to take advantage of opportunities better than others. People cannot become leaders simply by attending training programs; although, unquestionably, such programs can help to improve one's interpersonal skills, technical abilities and understanding of the court community function. People cannot become leaders simply by joining professional associations, like the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the Police Executive Research Forum, or the National Sheriff's Association, even though these are valuable associations to join and from which to learn.

Finally, while the reading of books on leadership and the biographies of great leaders provide excellent examples of the proper conduct of leaders, becoming a leader yourself requires more than simple emulation of other great people.

No Quick Fix

How then can you achieve the status of leader? Apparently there is no quick fix, no secret formula, and no magic elixir to help you reach this position. While leadership training, books and mentors can help you to understand the leadership role, effective performance of this role requires much more than any of these can provide. *Learning to be a leader begins and ends with you, for you will have to stand up for what you think is right; you will have to assume responsibility for showing the way by communicating the vision; you will have to speak out about what can be done to achieve the organization's mission effectively and efficiently.* This is true whether you are an executive, in management, or in maintenance. It requires that you know your job and you know what is right. It requires discipline, moderation and a willingness to listen to other points of view. It may require compromise, willingness to try something new, a willingness to perhaps fail. You must have character, a knowledge and understanding of the alternatives to various courses of action and the confidence in yourself to take an occasional risk if necessary.

Identifying Core Beliefs and Principles:

A Critical First Step

To be successful and convincing at these tasks, however, you must first look inward to identify and declare your core beliefs -- those principles for effective living that will help you determine what is the right thing to do at work and in your service to the community. Only through such self-examination and identification will you be able to develop the sense of commitment inherent in effective leaders -- to learn how to "walk the way you talk." You will make mistakes, at times even fail at your task. All leaders do. However, if you hold to those principles of character, if you try consistently to do what you think is right, you will win the respect of your colleagues. In the end, you be recognized as a leader. Perhaps, too, others will one day recall that you had an impact on their lives. You helped them decide to do the right thing and in so doing, helped them become a leader!

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<http://www.neiassociates.org/leader.htm>